

## **“What Jesus is Saying to His Church: ‘Be Encouraged’”**

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Revelation 1

I meet so many people in the course of my day who are just plain discouraged. Perhaps they are struggling with some intractable illness that just doesn't seem to get better. Or they have been looking for work for months now, but nothing seems to open up. The recession seems to go on forever and ever and we worry about making ends meet and whether we will ever be able to retire. Folks are discouraged by the state of the world as memories of 9-11 come flooding back and talk of burning Korans threatens to stir up more hatred and violence.

Discouragement! We've all experienced it. Some great dream of ours is shattered, some great hope is dashed, a wonderful opportunity for us or for our families is missed, some bit of good news turns sour.

Discouragement, as the word indicates, leaves us without courage. Self-confidence disappears. Deep and continual discouragement can turn into a feeling of dread, as though one were entering into a dark cave or a narrowing tunnel with no light at the end. Discouragement can lead to a spirit of resignation – of hopelessness, of utter despair.

The Apostle John certainly knew discouragement. One only has to think of his situation. He was a captive of the Roman government and as such was forcibly sent into exile to Patmos, a small rocky island off the coast of present day Turkey. Scholars of the first-century have found evidences that the Roman government maintained rock quarries on Patmos to which prisoners and banished troublemakers were sent to live out their lives. Such was John's lot. Life was very difficult indeed. For someone who cared deeply about his brothers and sisters in the Christian church, the sense of social isolation must have been awful. The churches in that day were in a sorry state, and he, being a leader in the church, seemed powerless to help.

So much had changed. John was one of the original disciples of Jesus. He followed Jesus and his life was transformed by the power of his love. He watched the band of the faithful grow from twelve, to seventy and beyond. After the resurrection of Jesus, to which he was a witness, he saw the Christian faith spread like wildfire, and saw churches spring up all over the Roman Empire. He had been greatly encouraged as Christ was proclaimed in the marketplace and in homes and temple squares and so many were coming to faith. Everything seemed to be looking up for the Christian movement. He himself was an important leader in the church, lovingly giving himself in service to his people.

But then opposition against the church began to escalate. There were ruthless government crackdowns. The Emperor Diocletian tried to stamp out any who would not offer sacrifices to him as divine. Persecution became a fact of life for the church. John himself was made a prisoner because of his preaching of the Word and was carried off into exile. In addition to external threats, churches faced idolatry and immorality from within their own fellowships. False teachers were leading many astray.

So John was depressed not only by his own situation, but also by the state of the Christian church and by the state of the world, where the forces of darkness seemed to be beating back the forces of light. Things looked grim. In his isolation, sitting in some dark cave, John must have felt helpless and thoroughly disillusioned. Scary thoughts must have entered his mind; *“Has God abandoned the cause? Has God given up on the church?”*

Many people in our own day feel equally grim and discouraged about the state of the Christian church. In many places it seems to be in retreat. Not too long ago, Christian faith enjoyed prominence in society – indeed, it was the glue that held society together. The church was a powerful moral voice to which people paid heed. But now the church has been marginalized and basically ignored by our culture. The Christian church in our society has seemed strangely powerless and seemingly without a vision or purpose. Its priorities seem to be confused. Like the church in John’s day, it struggles with hostile societal attitudes from without, and false teachings, idolatry and immorality from within. Members of churches are demoralized and wonder if their congregations can find renewal. Many pastors are discouraged. They and their churches seem to just be going through the motions, pretending that nothing has changed. They look at the declining membership statistics of their churches and they wonder if their congregation has a future. Has God abandoned the church? Why does the Christian church seem so weak and ineffectual, unable to make a difference in the world today?

Amidst John’s discouragement over his own personal situation and being dismayed by the state of the world and that of the church he so loved, John experienced a vision at once so powerful and so dramatic, that it literally knocked him off his feet. All of a sudden his discouragement gave way to a spirit of elation, of courage, of confidence, of hope...

He tells us what happened. *“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.”* That is, he was worshiping the Lord one Sunday as was his habit, when he was bowled over by the sound of a voice like a trumpet. And he turned and saw a glorious vision of the exalted Christ; it was so grand that words could not fully describe. He attempts to give us a picture of what he saw, and it is rich with biblical symbolism. It is a magnificent picture of the Lord high and lifted up (*Rev: 1:12-16*):

He says he saw **one who was like a Son of Man**: hearkening back to the exalted Messiah figure in Daniel who was to come with the clouds to bring judgment.

He wore **a robe and sash** – the garb of a high priest who represents God to the people and the people to God.

His **head and hair were white as wool** – signs of wisdom and purity

His **eyes were like a flame of fire**, penetrating, burning away all that is impure and unholy.

His **feet were like burnished bronze** – stable, a worthy foundation in which to place our trust.

And **out of his mouth came a double-edged sword** – symbolizing the piercing force of his message.

And this impressive figure is seen **walking among the seven golden lampstands (vs 12)** – which are the seven churches of Asia to whom John is to write.

And **he holds in his hands the seven “stars” (vs. 16) – the “angels” (vs. 20) of the churches**, which may refer to the elders or pastors of those churches. The point is that Jesus Christ walks among the churches – he has not abandoned them – and he “holds them in his hands.” He grasps all the churches in his loving care.

Here is the Risen, Exalted, Living Lord in all his splendor and glory. Here is the Lord, powerful to save, eager to help, worthy of our trust no matter how desperate the times. It is a magnificent picture of Jesus. This vision was exactly what a discouraged John and what discouraged people and churches needed then and now.

No matter how bad things seem, no matter how grim the outlook, no matter how deep the discouragement, Jesus Christ is alive and well. *“Don’t be afraid, he says, “I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.”*

Over and above all the disappointment and heartache is Jesus Christ, who is bringing about his loving purposes, despite appearances to the contrary. He is the One who can unlock the prison-house of discouragement and resignation. (“I have the keys of death and Hades”). He brings life out of death.

And to John he says: *“Now write what you have seen...and send it to the churches.”*

Jesus Christ walks among us, holding us in his competent hands. Alleluia! This is wonderful assurance for us today: Christ will not let us go; He is with us; he holds the situations and problems of today in the palm of his concern. He will give us the power and insight we need for today. If we ask him, he will give us his perspective on our needs and his partnership in facing and conquering our problems, however impossible they appear.

The challenge for all of us who so easily get discouraged in life, be it over our own personal situation, or our discouragement over the state of the world and of today’s church, is to keep this grand vision of the exalted Christ before us. It means stepping out of our cave-like discouragement in order to see the bigger picture. The vision of his loving, living, reigning presence must be kept ever before us.

Where there is discouragement and poor morale there is lack of vision. Show me a weak church and I will show you a church that has failed to keep Jesus Christ front and center in her life and ministry. Where there is no vision, discouragement is bound to follow.

It is so easy for a church to so focus on its problems that it cannot see the opportunities the Lord is laying out before it.

We can get so busy about our programs that we forget what we are doing what we do and who it is we are trying to serve. We can be so busy doing church that we miss the big picture, the grand vision of our powerful Lord who would accomplish amazing things through us.

All this is a very helpful reminder to us as we begin the fall season of the church. As busy as we are now, we must keep Jesus Christ front and center. We must keep the grand vision of his living presence always before us, lest we quickly give in to discouragement and negative thinking. We tend to think too small and take a “woe is me “ approach to life. John’s vision reminds us that the God we serve is bigger than any problem we have or any obstacle we face.

Could I give you some counsel? If you have been discouraged lately, spend some time meditating on the first chapter of Revelation. Allow the big picture to sink in. Note all the titles and attributes given to Jesus Christ.

*Jesus who was, who is, who is to come...*  
*The faithful witness,*  
*Firstborn of the dead*  
*Ruler of the kings of the earth.*  
*Who loves us*  
*Frees us from sin*  
*Coming with the clouds*  
*The first and the last ..*  
*The almighty*

We serve a mighty God. Let the grandness of the vision shared by John encourage you. Allow yourself to be enthralled by the greatness and splendor of Jesus Christ. That’s what our worship is supposed to be all about – to get a bigger picture, a grander vision of who God is and of how God is at work in our lives and in the world. If God doesn’t seem bigger to you after worship, then something is wrong. Our God is an awesome God. So great a God will never disappoint us...So great a God will never abandon us. *“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

Once during the Civil War, when things were at their worst, the Governor of Illinois wrote Abraham Lincoln an utterly discouraged letter--everything going to the dogs! And Lincoln wrote back: *“Dear Dick: Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.”*

Be encouraged! No matter how deep the discouragement, our great and awesome God will bear us up and see us through. May we keep him always before us. To him be the glory forever!  
 Amen!